

*Art as Mental Prosthetic : The Non-Logocentric Body in the Bit-Stream*

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by

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Joseph Nechvatal in 1995 in Paris

All of my work stems from a computer virus program I developed as Louis Pasteur artist-in-resident at Arbois, France (Pasteur's home-town). This program was written on Hyper-card in Basic, with the assistance of Prof. Massonie.

My computer-robotic assisted paintings focus on an interface between the virtual and the actual (the viractual) - between immersion and withdrawal. With the increased augmentation of the self via micro-electronics feasible today, the real may co-exist with the

virtual and the organic fuse with the computer-robotic. Consequently, I am interested in a new unbridled sense of artistic heterogeneity and alterity which couples the biological with the technological. Hence, my computer-robotic assisted paintings strive for a depiction of an anti-essentiality of the body-in-bits which allows no privileged logos, but insists, rather, on a displacement or deferral of meaning. Images of the flesh are undone by disturbances they cannot contain - even as I identify the body as central in a matrix of possibilities.

The basic premise behind my computer-robotic assisted paintings is the rhizomatic exploration of host/parasite omnijectivity (the metaphysical concept stemming from the discoveries of quantum physics which teaches us that mind (previously considered the subjective realm) and matter (previously considered as the objective realm) are inextricably linked) under the influence of today's high-frequency, electronic, computerized environment.

Moreover, host/parasite viral encounters with the codes of computer simulation create the ribald opportunity for transgression of conventional limitations. In the viral rupture, thought detaches itself from the host/parasite order and authority of the old sign and topples down into the realm of the virtual, of imagination, of contradictory fantasy, and into sublime non-knowledge.

This non-knowledge is certainly the most erudite, the most aware, the most conscious, and the most cluttered area of our consciousness - as it is also the depths from which we beings emerge as parasites into our precarious existence.

The work's general Fin-de-Siècle ornamental excess gives to us a metaphor for the current computational conditions of our seeing - and perhaps for our expansive conditions of parasite/host being. In the rising and collapsing of alternative visualizations and unordered revelations, the circuits of the mind find an occupation exactly congruent with my art's immanent structure.

I have continued to work with the classical canvas in the digital age. They are computer-robotic assisted paintings, however, executed with acrylic paint and robotically laser painted - usually to the size of 2 by 3 meters.

Though my work is perhaps heading for presentation in the classical virtual reality hardware/eyewear where immersion is total and where the viewer/user is free to navigate his or her way through the deep perceptual space which my art suggests, I plan also to continue the presentation of silent still images painted on canvas for certain very obvious

reasons: contemplation possibilities offered to the viewer, the use of natural light, the suggested (therefore more actively imagined) immersion by use of large scale dimensions, permanency, warmth.

I very much like to work with the digital image in its ultimate elements, the immaterial abstract information of pixels and I like very much the world wide transportable dimension of the Internet, where the digital data-stream travels at the speed of light - but I also like to see a large scaled iconic image just sitting still on a canvas so I can silently reflect on it and move within the work in natural light at my leisure with customary unrestrictions to my bodily movements.

The essential characteristic of digital information is that it can be manipulated easily and very rapidly by computer. It is simply a matter of substituting new digits for old. Digital images are, in fact, much more susceptible to alteration than photographs, drawings, paintings, or any other kinds of images. So the art of the digital image cannot adequately be understood as primarily a matter of capture and printing.

Computational tools for transforming, combining, altering, and analyzing images are as essential to the digital artist as brushes and pigments are to a painter, and an understanding of them is the foundation of the craft of digital imaging.

Furthermore, since captured, "painted," and synthesized pixel values can be combined seamlessly, the digital image blurs the customary distinctions between painting and photography and between mechanical and handmade pictures. A digital image may be part scanned photograph, part computer-synthesized shaded perspective, and part electronic "painting" all smoothly melded into an apparently coherent whole. It may be fabricated from found files, disk litter, the detritus of cyberspace. Digital imagers give meaning and value to computational ready-mades by appropriation, transformation, reprocessing, and recombination; we have entered the age of electrobricolage.

In this respect painting's unique distinction is much less in what painting does or attempts, but in how it does it. One of the things that painting does pretty well is present simultaneous imagery that lingers for contemplation. Painting can present mutually exclusive conditions at the same time. A satisfactory painting is good at this. If computer animation can be compared to a reel of tape, then painting can be compared to random access memory. That all the information is available all the time is something that painting has going for it. Too often we concentrate on this quality as a weakness and make futile attempts to bring

the element of time into an art form that is the strongest at presenting a timeless and simultaneous image that exists in a virtual space.

On the other side, computers I find, can give more significance to trial & error than simple freedom of choice - do to their powerful speed. They can draw correspondences with the creative pattern of consciousness. They can blow stale imagination away. This has been my experience at least. Yet as of now a computer screen remains primarily a tool for me - not an end. This may change if I obtain the opportunity to translate my work into the virtual reality format.

Recently, particularly interesting to me is the dialectic between theory and practice, and between the symbolic and the imaginary. Can an artwork combine explicitly theoretical discourse with the intuitive practice? Can art show that the two are not "opposed"?

The key word here may be the term 'explicit'. Without it, it seems that any discourse with pretensions of explanation is theoretical. In this sense, almost all conceptual art has reconciled theory and practice.

On the other hand, however, only discourses which situate themselves within a theoretical frame can claim to be 'explicitly' theoretical. In other words, for a discourse to claim an explicitly theoretical status, it is necessary to hold a continuity through various rhetorical effects such as the use of certain jargon with other discourses of 'recognized' theory. Since there is still no such framework within to place artwork alone, I think it is very hard for any art form to play the role of explication. In other -very plain- words, art can do theory, but it cannot call it so. Because theory, as a practice, has defined itself in explicit exclusion, not so much of intuitive practice, but of art.

Explicitly theoretical discourses such as philosophy, but also science, have no problem finding phenomena which may accommodate them with different sorts of social - political practices. On the contrary, there are many who see these hybrids not to be the exception but the rule for example Bruno LaTour in his "We Have Never Been Moderns", but also many besides him. In other words, in a certain sense, of course artworks combine theory and practice and may serve as living proof of the fact that theory and practice are not opposed... but so do many other social and political phenomena. However, some may sustain that this combination does not prove anything against theorists who still try to avoid all contact with intuitive practice, because it is the pursuits of both pure theory and purely intuitive practice which end up allowing for such combination as that which takes place in art. They would say that it is the idea that there are two separated realms of the symbolic

and the imaginary which ultimately 'invites' and makes the transgression of the boundary between them possible. Many post-Foucaultians sustain this. I am sorry to use the third person while exposing these positions, but I haven't worked them enough to endorse or reject them yet. The point in which I agree and the one I am trying to argue for here is that the way art combines theory and practice does not mean that art has transcended theory, but on the contrary, it is dependent on the constructs of theory.

Thus for me, the theory of 'virtuality' and 'interactivity' is of extreme interest because it is primarily in that theoretical generation of a space of action within a viewer's head where the link between exceptional moments and art can be established. Back in the 1950's Susan Langer argued in "Philosophy in a New Key" that ALL drawing and painting could be perceived as virtual realities. So, perhaps the earliest examples of experimentation in virtual reality are to be found in French and Spanish caves, dating from nearly 18-20,000 years ago? Even then a virtual depth condenses and enfolds the imaginative capacity into an exceptional moment. For the virtual experience is diagonal; it transpires in deep space and time and, in a sense, secures that time and space for us.

Thought of like that, it seems the West has been preparing for computer simulated virtual reality for 2,500 years. There has always been an idea of the virtual, whether it was grounded in mysticism, abstract analytical thinking, or magical and romantic fantasy. All of these approaches have shaped and manipulated invisible worlds accessible only through the imagination, and in some cases these models have been given ontological privilege. What has made contemporary concepts and ideologies of the virtual possible is that these preexisting systems of thought have expanded out of the imagination, and manifested themselves in the development and understanding of technology. The resulting images in my art, as condensed as they may be, extract traces of the virtual from past historical and philosophical narratives. That is what I do in my computer-robotic assisted paintings.

(virus paintings)

These traces and lines you see in the works show inter textual relationships between seemingly disparate systems of thought that have now been recombined into a working body of aesthetic knowledge under the sign of technology. My computer-robotic paintings try to expand upon the present aesthetic and technical limits of computer-technology by combining "old" elements in new ways. They are neither the ultimate nor the final step, but they are steps in the process of building the new art. In an age when anything can be a work of art, the question of whether something is art has ceased to be compelling. What

matters is whether an artists vision is itself art. Like everything important in human life though, art must be judged on the basis of first hand actual experience. No formula can be devised prescribing its assessment.

(show Archons series)

*Archons* is a series from a body of work called *Requiem for the Industrial Revolution*. The Archons are the creator angels in the Gnostic system of belief where spirits make up the universe in their saturated abundance. This post-industrial, post-viral undertaking was meant to indicate the historical position of both the traditional art object and the viewer.

I think of my own angelic virtual reality chamber as where I mentally go when I want to consider the "meaning" of something or somebody. If meaning can be said to exist somewhere, it appears to me to "be" right here in this neurally generated space of visualization. This sensory experience is metaphorical but analogous to what I have available in material space. In addition, I can move through time in here and play out any number of other things I can't do in material space. I have done this in a most profound way in a sense deprivation tank. In this view, meaning is a projection of a specific constituted system with a sensory capability to distinguish difference and connect a "value" to that meaning.

Certainly the space of culture has dramatically changed with the revolution in technology brought about by the rapid development of the networked computer. The Internet has created a new geography of relations that could only be imagined as little as twenty years ago. And of course, art cannot help being of its time and place, but the interesting question to ask about art that deliberately comments on its time through the use of the latest technological innovations is what makes it more than mere commentary? What makes it art? As Goethe put it, "only the mediocre talent is always the captive of its time and must get its nourishment from the elements that time contains." The insistence that art reflect only the tangled realities of high-tech life is a temptation that most digital artists, in my view, should resist.

The historical sense of visualization then, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes an artist's vision virtual. At the end of the millennium, vision and the body have made the quantum jump into a transcendental, multiple self of mediated virtual realities. The question is no longer what or who I am, but how can I be all that I can be. Yet the vision of cyberspace is both an

old and a new one. It is old with respect to the fantastical aspects projected into the qualities of an idealized situation. This we know from many kinds of science fiction or from the study of American Indian religious ceremonies. On the other hand, it is radically new through its personification within the consensual reality of interactive, computer constructed environments.

What Jacques Derrida has described as logocentrism: the once held distinctions between subjectivity and objectivity; between public and private; between fantasy and reality; between the subconscious and the conscious realm is certainly up for grabs with online technology. Today these distinctions are breaking down under the pressure of our speeding and omnipresent computer communications technologies. We are now part of a technologically hallucinogenic culture that functions along the lines of a dream, free from the strictures of time and space; free from some of our traditional earthly limits which have been broken down by the instantaneous nature of electronic communications. The modernist existential concept of the singular individual has been supplanted by the media-reproduced individual, in a way liberated from what used to be thought of as historical time, vaporously existing in a technologically stored eternity (simulacrum-hyper reality). This quality of phantasmagorical and perverse displacement has formulated a new vision of existence which Baudrillard has called pornographic and what Deleuze & Guattari call schizoid.

My most series is 'Decadence & Divinity', work which plays with the notion of sex & flesh from an online mechanical view point -- not unrelated to Duchamp's 'Bachelor Machine'. These works were created using pornographic material found on the internet. These nasty pictures were then infected with my computer virus attack and refigured.

The historical context for this work can be traced I suppose to the deconstruction of the stable concept of the image which was central to the premises of 20th century modernism. Modernism's cure to industrial age's spiritual and cultural uncertainty was to propose that a universal language of form could transcend personal circumstances and thus serve as a site of stable meaning for all. In turn, the idea that meaning could attend to visual form, language, or human action, outside of culture and history came under severe attack in the decades now associated with Postmodernism in which the realization that images are always part of their moment, laden with specific cultural values, and implicated in networks of power and repression.

An entire generation of artists based their practice on holding a harshly mimetic mirror to the blatant banalities and exploitative grotesqueries of a world transformed by the

commodification, commercialization, and co-optation of every aspect of human life. I am working on precisely a counter demonstration, intent upon showing the continued potency of still images as a site and instrument of critical pleasure by working against the expectations of a visually numbed saturated culture.

This idea has been borrowed from George Bataille and loosely applied in my art to our current social-technological environment with its emphasis on the ideology of the "Soft Machine" of image consumption. By overloading visual representations to the point of collapsing realistic depiction into a non-representational representation, the essentialism of the previous decades' art and general social (image) character which was presumed to be founded on good authority, takes on a loosened function which favors mutation. In their fullness and openness, these viruses attacked art works take revenge on our techno-mediocratic society and willfully fail to blindly copy it. They, in my view, attempt to paralyze the referential and the communicative function. The object of their language is not direct communications, but rather its own presence and subtle communication as meta-information. The richness and opacity of the visual language found here defers, even resists common identification and destabilizes conventional sense in which the representational media dominates our symbolic life. The point is to ask the viewer to choose participatory interactive imagination over passivity - in fact the viewer becomes central in a way that recalls Roland Barthes' reader in his influential essay "The Death of the Author". I quote: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the work is constituted...the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."

This is not entirely new. Eighty years ago El Lissitzky wanted to create an art which would remake the relationship between the work of art and the spectator so that the artwork would no longer be reducible to an object-in-itself but would come into being through the relationship between the object and the spectator. El Lissitzky had been struck by the demonstrative behavior of the devout before Russian orthodox icons; by how they would bow and genuflect and kiss the images as if through their actions they hoped to invoke some power or energy or as if they themselves were bringing the divine into existence. He was equally affected by elements of Jewish theology which hold that God exists not in things but in events. Translated into the secular terms of the modernist avant-garde these phenomena provided him with a model for a new art in which the spectator's role in the production of meanings would be privileged as never before - art as imaginary materialization.



Thus in the outlandish manipulations of its visual activity, my virus infected art gives to society no cures or certainties, but in their own way these artworks counter the fatalism of recent political Postmodernism by refusing to use for their art the very conditions that appear to diminish us. What they offer us then is not a soon to be recuperated "politically correct" critique, but rather critical pleasure. They carry out raids on the stock of public imagery, emotions and techniques. They, in their own way, raid the frozen artistic ideologies in society and rework them, unfreeze them, and alter their meanings. They challenge the domination of the singular linear image without resorting to reassuring sentimentalities. Their (and thus our) identity is revealed to be a shifting seeking process.

The works general Fin de Siècle ornamental excess gives to us a metaphor for the current conditions of our seeing - and perhaps for our broader global-technological conditions of being.